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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine whether students comprehend student-authored material more easily than the material of published authors. The Fry Readability Graph was used to estimate the readability of 8 published passages of 200-270 words, which varied from grade 5 through grade 10. The topic of each passage was listed and used in a 2-day writing exercise in seventeen 10th-grade English classrooms. The student-written passages were grouped according to topic, and eight were randomly selected and paired with published passages. Sixteen cloze tests were constructed from the samples: eight student written and eight published passages. Each student completed the tests in one pair, with no students completing a cloze test for the student-authored and published passage of the same content. A t-test was used to determine the significance of student comprehension scores. The results indicated that there was little difference between mean cloze scores for the student-authored versus published passages. The mean cloze score for the student written passages was only slightly higher than the mean cloze score for the published passages. (Appendixes contain the instructions for the student writers, a sample of the student content information sheet, and a sample of the cloze tests.) (HTH)

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COMPREHENSION OF STUDENT-AUTHORED
VERSUS PUBLISHED MATERIAL

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
OF
RUTGERS
THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY
BY
KAREN ELGRIM SENSI
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF
MASTER OF EDUCATION

COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSON: Edward B. Fry, Ph.D.

NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

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ABSTRACT

Research in the area of student writing has identified that writing complexity seems to increase with age. This is consistent with theories of cognitive development.

Writers use increasingly complex types of transformations as they mature. Studies have identified the types of transformations which are commonly used by writers at different age and grade levels (Takahashi, 1975). Passages written at a transformationally typical grade 5 level, are best comprehended by students at that level, fifth graders (Smith, 1970).

These studies have been interpreted as supporting the concept of peer writing. Students can best comprehend passages which are transformationally similar to their own speech and writing patterns. Therefore, students have a better chance of effectively communicating to their peers than do published authors.

A sense of audience is a crucial component of effective writing. Nystrand (1979) and Walmsley (1978) have identified areas in which the writer/reader relationship affects comprehension.

Therefore, this study asked the question, "is student-authored material more easily comprehended than published material?"

Eight published passages of 200-270 words were selected. Fry's (1977) graph was used to estimate the readability of each published passage. The content of each passage was listed and used in a two-day class writing exercise for the tenth grade students at a public high school.

Students were directed to write a 200-275 word composition using all of the listed information. The information, as presented, was

not in order. Students were instructed to group and order the information and to use their own vocabulary in the composition.

All student written samples were then screened and eliminated for number of words, content, and readability level. Of the samples remaining, one was randomly selected to be paired with the published sample of the same content.

Cloze tests were constructed using the eight published and eight student-authored samples.

During English class, ninth grade students took the cloze tests. Each student completed two tests, one on each day of a two-day exercise. Mean percent scores were significantly higher for the student-authored passages in three cases and significantly higher for one published passage. Overall means, however, evidenced no significant difference.

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

Many studies have looked at readers and their writing in a variety of ways. Some focus on the components of student-authored works by assessing its structures, its readability, and its consideration of audience. Nystrand (1979) and Walmsley (1978) each stress the importance of the role of audience or reader within the composing process in terms of constraints used by the writer (Nystrand, 1979) or writing contexts (Walmsley, 1978).

The comprehension of different syntactic transformations across various grade levels has been quite thoroughly explored. It seems that persons at different levels of development comprehend materials of various syntactic complexity to various degrees. Older students tend to comprehend complex structures better than younger students. This indicates a trend which might coincide with cognitive development.

Communication-centered theorists stress the importance of meaningful student writing situations and suggest classroom use of student writing. This is the concept behind the Language Experience Approach (LEA). Student dictated/self-read stories is a widely used teaching method for elementary classrooms. Teachers who use the Language Experience Approach feel that some students develop reading problems because their egocentric language differs greatly from that

of a published text. The Language Experience Approach uses the child's own language, his compositions become his reading text, and a disparity between the language a child reads and the language a child understands doesn't occur. It is felt that this helps to offset potential reading problems.

Statement of the Problem

Some studies show that students best comprehend material written at a syntactic complexity similar to their own oral speech patterns. Also, student-authored writing is assumed to be of motivating content as well as compatible word choice and language patterns. Therefore, this study will investigate the question: "Is student-authored material more easily comprehended by peers than published material?"

Hypothesis: There will be no difference in comprehension scores on a cloze test between student-authored passages and published passages of the same general content and readability.

Importance of the Study

If peers can communicate through writing more effectively than adult/student, many conceptions about the teaching of reading may be questioned. For example, the producers and publishers of HI/LO reading materials for less able readers may begin to consider number of words and sentence length as less important than factors such as syntactical complexity.

The notion of student authorship, in and of itself, may gain more credence. Within the communication model, writing is thinking as are reading, speaking, and listening. Therefore, students should write about ideas, interpret these ideas through writing, and read each others interpretations. This is just as necessary as a communication tool as speaking and listening.

Hopefully, this study will determine if student-authored writing is better. To be better, student-authored writing should prove to be more comprehensible than traditional published text. One aspect which might prove to be relevant is the probable greater imaginability of student writing. Being developmentally similar, student authors may set-up expectations within the text which will make literal cloze completion of student-authored passages easier for the student reader. Elley (Buros, 1978) calls this redundancy.

Definition of Terms

Student-Authored Versus Published Text

The use of the terms student-authored versus published text refers to samples which students write as opposed to articles and stories which are published by various companies. Published materials used in this study are intended for use as instructional material or for the students' reading pleasure.

Language Experience Approach

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) was developed to teach general communication skills as necessary and interrelated disciplines. Using the Language Experience Approach, students write. They learn to

read and spell by reading what they have written or dictated, and by sharing their products. Students use vocabulary and syntactic patterns which are their own. Theoretically, LEA meets students needs by precisely matching an individual student's development.

The communication model of learning interprets growth as a cumulative process of differentiation and integration (Moffett, 1976). Within the communication model reading, writing, speaking, and listening are interrelated and necessary processes of individual learning. Using the LEA, differentiation and integration occur at a level which is ideally suited to the individual student. The individual has an ideal chance to succeed at the psycholinguistic guessing game.

Cloze Procedure

Cloze procedure involves the "systematic deletion of every n^{th} word from a minimum of 220-250 words of running text" (Nystrand, 1979, p. 231). Taylor (cited in Nystrand, 1979) is cited as demonstrating the usefulness of cloze completion in measuring comprehension. Slotting is a term used to refer to the completion of a cloze passage.

Limitations of the Study

A high school population was used in this study. The results, therefore, may not apply to other populations for example younger children or disabled readers. This level was selected because it is most likely that differences will exist between student authored and published text. Differences in text were expected to exist in such areas as word choice and sentence structure on the syntactic level, and idea imbedding and individual vocabulary nuances on the semantic and contextual levels.

Overview of the Study

Chapter Two contains a review of research and proposed theory related to student comprehension of peer-authored passages. Much emphasis is devoted to the study of commonly used syntax patterns since syntactical complexity seems to play a large role in comprehension.

Described in Chapter Three are the procedures used to implement this study while Chapter Four reports the findings. In Chapter Five, conclusions regarding the proposed hypothesis are discussed as well as suggestions for further research in this area.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Although cognitive developmental theorists vary widely in their assessments of developmental levels and in their perceptions of the relationship between development and learning, "a well known and empirically established fact is that learning should be matched in some manner with the child's developmental level" (Cole et al., 1978, p. 85). This basic premise underlies the hypothesis. It has been assumed that student-authored text will be more easily comprehended because it matches a peer's developmental level.

A review of studies which have applied the general concepts of Language Experience Approach will illustrate the contention that learning to communicate must be integrated; that reading, writing, speaking, and listening in a give and take process will enhance total communication. Studies in the general area of student writing have isolated certain variables which make student writing more or less readable. Ability of the student author to attend to his audience, as well as syntactic aspects of student writing, have been considered.

Since conducting the study will involve assessing passage readability and construction of cloze passages, various methods have been investigated to ensure that valid and reliable testing materials are used.

Communication Model

Four variables of the Language Experience Approach have been outlined as the factors which make the use of student-authored text effective as classroom teaching materials. These variables are language usage, topic, audience, and language awareness (Sulzby, 1980). Sulzby has defined these variables in the following way. Language usage is a variable which makes student writing superior to published materials because student writing uses the child's own language. Personal syntactic and semantic knowledge will match between the individual's writing and his reading. When writing, a child chooses his own topic and passage content. His personal experiences will be more meaningful than a published story's in the transfer from writing to reading. Sulzby (1980) asserts that a child dictates with audience in mind and that, using his own metalinguistic system, the child will become more aware of language. Published materials would tend to force him to conform to a preconceived metalinguistic scheme.

Russell Stauffer (cited in Sulzby, 1980) agrees with Sulzby. Referring to a child's dictated story, he states that "dictations fit the beginning reader's cognitive-affective development better than adult written stories do and that therefore children can learn to read more easily" (Sulzby, 1980, p. 773).

If communication is, as Moffett contends, a matching of minds (Moffett, 1976), then a small child's self-dictated and self-read story would serve as a perfect communication tool because at this stage egocentricity is a hallmark of development.

A communication model of learning stresses analysis and synthesis of information. Moffett (1976) calls this abstracting, in contrast to

the traditional linear or assembly line model. Rather than prescribing content which individual students are expected to intake despite varied levels of individual development, Moffett suggests that students assimilate content by learning to communicate in the sense that they match minds. To Moffett, "comprehending and composing concern nothing so much as trying to match private minds by means of a public vehicle called language" (Moffett, 1976, p. 9).

Young children, in the egocentric stage of development, use their private language as public language not realizing that their code is not the same as the rest of the community. Older children begin to learn the public code, but at varying rates of development, suggesting that peers, like in developmental levels, may better match private minds and in essence, communicate.

The Student As Writer

In 1977, Arthur Appleby summarized the literature, to date, on the relationship between reading and writing. At that time, researchers were reporting that a reading and writing link did exist.

Evans (1979) found an inverse relationship between students' written syntax and their comprehension of those same syntactic structures, as measured by cloze. Cloze scores for eighth grade, twelfth grade, and university students varied inversely with the complexity of their written syntax. Younger students who wrote using less complicated syntax demonstrated better comprehension of syntactically complex cloze tests than older, more mature, and more complex writers. Evans gives no explanation for his findings, which are contrary to most.

Some more recent studies have gone beyond the analysis of syntax as a link between writing and reading. Nystrand (1979) uses cloze to measure the readability of student writing. To Nystrand, good writing attunes to an identified audience. The effective writer constrains his composition so that the reader is directed toward appropriate comprehension of the text. Nystrand defines this writing ability "as the extent to which intended and relevant readers are able to ascertain intended relations between and among words and sentences in the text" (Nystrand, 1979, p. 232). Nystrand categorizes the constraints that the writer can make upon the text as graphic, syntactic, semantic, lexical, and contextual. In this way, he has expanded the reading and writing relationship beyond mechanical consideration of syntactical development and beyond the individual. A writer's ability is linked not only to his own personal comprehension ability but also to that of other's, his audience.

Poor written communication can occur when any of the above five aspects of a text is inadequate or over-constrained (Nystrand, 1979). If readers do play a psycholinguistic guessing game (Nystrand, 1979), their fluency depends upon the writer's ability to provide clear, concise, and well-constrained cues.

Especially in the areas of semantic, lexical, and contextual constraints, is it not likely that student writers may cue their peers better? A student author will be more likely to use the same or similar vocabulary as his peers. Particular word choice and style of expression can vary in an infinite number of ways and still communicate the same idea. Nystrand's contention is that intended audience affect these parameters.

Looking at the reading/writing connection through another looking glass, Walmsley (1978) has independently drawn conclusions similar to those of Nystrand. Readers and writers are involved on four contextual levels within the communication process (Walmsley, 1978). In a linguistic context, the words and sentences a writer will use and construct have a definite bearing on the reader's interpretation and comprehension. In this sense, Nystrand's inadequate or over-constraints parallel what Walmsley calls opacity and transparency. This has to do with poor or effective written communication. Transparency is defined as the clarity of written communication within the four contexts (Walmsley, 1978).

Walmsley's social and schematic contexts refer to the individual's environment and knowledge of the world. The strategic context has to do with purpose, either reading or writing.

A major contrast to Nystrand is that Walmsley considers not only the writer's ability to communicate to a designated audience. He proposes that reading and writing are two-fold, two participant endeavors. The reader and the writer assume active and important roles from the inception of the composing process.

Considering, for example, Walmsley's social context, student authors writing for individual class consumption are in the exact same social context as the reader, illustrating clarity or high transparency. Student authors are much more likely to use the same linguistic context as their peers than are published authors. Another implication to be drawn from these contexts is that a student author's schema is likely to match that of a peer due to relatively similar cognitive growth. This would be true for students from the same

particular geographic and socio-economic environment. A schematic match exists, for the most part, for students from the same high school and classroom. It is especially desirable when given the implementation of a classroom strategy similar to that of LEA. One can almost assume a highly transparent reader/writer correspondence.

In summary, written communication must occur on a variety of levels. Many of these tie-in directly with an author's ability to write for his audience. Nystrand (1979) states that an author constrains his message according to his intended audience. Effective reading comprehension depends upon the author's ability to constrain his message for his intended audience. Persons of like ability, like development, and like social contexts (Walmsley, 1978) may perform this function more appropriately. Peers may be better equipped to communicate, through writing, to their peers.

The Student as Reader

Henry (1977) identified twenty-five linguistic features of writing and concluded that approximately 55% of the comprehension of written material can be accounted for by three factors: passage content, syntactical complexity, and redundancy. The interesting component of this study however, is that these three factors varied in importance across grade levels implying that persons of different developmental levels use different variables or factors to comprehend written text.

Apparently, comprehensibility of literature for college freshmen is greatly affected by amount of verb nominalization and abstract nouns (Duffelmeyer, 1979). Abstract nouns are defined as those which

cannot be perceived by the senses. If these nouns are derived from verbs, they are called nominalized verbs. Duffelmeyer (1979) sampled a group of college freshmen of poor, average, and good reading ability to see if presence or absence of these grammatical structures affected reading comprehension. The comprehension of good and average readers was not affected. Poor readers comprehended transformationally simplified passages significantly better. From the results of this study, Duffelmeyer (1979) concludes that "apparently, the efficiency with which printed material transmits information can be manipulated, within certain limits, depending on the level of language employed by the writer" (p. 10).

Earlier studies support this same general concept. Smith (1970) found that readers of different ages and developmental levels comprehended passages according to degree of syntactic complexity. The results of Smith's study indicate that fourth grade students comprehended a transformationally typical fourth grade passage best. Eleventh grade students comprehended a transformationally typical eleventh grade passage better than a less complex fourth grade passage. This suggests that students may best read what they normally produce. Smith (1970) contends that habit may have something to do with the results of his study. Students read better the form they are used to writing, speaking, and reading (Smith, 1970, p. 8).

Tatham's (1968, 1970) findings also support this idea. She determined that, for second and fourth grade students, comprehension of passages and sentences using frequent oral language patterns was superior to those using infrequent oral language patterns. These frequent versus infrequent oral language patterns had been outlined

in a study completed by Strickland in 1962 (Tatham, 1968). Most of the patterns had to do with what Fry (1977a) has called Kernal Distance, the separation or transformation of noun-phrase/verb-phrase patterns so that phrases or distance intervene or invert order. Language patterns found infrequently in the speech of fourth grade students had great distance between Kernal parts. These patterns are also similar to the more difficult transformational structures as cited by Duffelmeyer (1979).

In her study of reading comprehension, Takahashi (1975) found that interruptions of subject and verb, embedding, and deletions were transformations which less able readers comprehended with great difficulty. Passages of this syntactic level of development were more easily comprehended by good versus poor ninth grade readers to the .001 level of significance. The importance of these results lies in the assumption that better ninth grade readers are developmentally more advanced than poor ninth grade readers.

Takahashi (1975) concludes by agreeing with Simons (cited in Takahashi, 1975) that comprehension of the deep structure of language is important. Comprehending deep structure necessitates comprehension of the syntactic structures used in written material as well as the semantic content. Comprehension is more difficult when transformations are more complex. A student's reading comprehension tends to parallel the level of his oral language development. This, too, adds to the credibility of student-authored reading material. Student authors may tend to write using the same syntax as their oral speech, the same syntax that developmentally equal peers can best comprehend.

Readability

Two factors need to be considered when choosing a readability formula, sentence length and word difficulty. Klare (1974) reviews many existing formulas, stressing that they predict readability and that a formula must be selected according to specific circumstances. Special or general needs must be considered as well as manual versus machine application, simple versus complex formula, word length versus word list, and sentence length versus sentence complexity.

Other predictions of readability have been suggested. Fry (1977b) mentions the SEER (Singer Eyeball Estimate of Readability). Along the same lines, Hartley, Trueman, and Burnhill (1980) have outlined a personal judgement process which compares spacing and content of paragraphs and sentences. The reader's circling of locations of possible difficulty has been suggested (Hartley et al., 1980) as well as a checklist approach (Irwin, Davis, 1980). The checklist user assesses understandability and learnability of text so that specific factors in materials, which may cause comprehension or retention problems, can be analyzed. (Irwin et al., 1980)

Differences in formulas can be narrowed down to a difference in the way the two crucial factors, sentence and word length, are measured. The Dale-Chall is consistently cited as the most reliable and accurate formula. It measures the number of unfamiliar or difficult words (as determined using a word list) by sentence length.

Fry's Graph enjoys validity with other major formulas through interformula assessment (Fry, 1977b). It is proclaimed to be quick and efficient (Cramer, 1978). Word length and sentence length are considered, meeting Klare's crucial criteria. Trapini and

Walmsley (1981) found that readability estimates using Fry's Graph are least affected by word and sentence modification or rewriting. Since rewriting of passages is an important component of this study, this aspect of measurement, as determined by Fry's Graph, is especially considered.

Cloze

Elley (Buros, 1978) considers the cloze procedure an estimate of the degree of similarity between writer and reader. Anderson (Buros, 1978) questions whether the cloze procedure can test higher level reading skills because cloze can be word bound, and slotting ability can rely on the redundancy of language. Elley (Buros, 1978) counters that just this ability to rely on redundancy indicates a familiarity with the conventions of the language and a better ability to play the psycholinguistic guessing game. Cloze completion can indicate the complexity of an individual's syntactic development through his ability to slot function words.

Using the cloze process and exact replacement scoring draws the "full complement of skills that (one) needs to read and comprehend" (Buros, 1978, p. 1174). Verbatim scoring also eliminates problems with reliability. Synonymic scoring is too subjective to be considered as reliable as exact word scoring (McKenna, 1976).

Reliability for cloze procedure has been found as high as .90 for a fifty item test (Buros, 1978). Concurrent validity of cloze versus multiple choice assessments has been measured at .80 (Buros, 1978), thus adding fuel to Elley's psycholinguistic game perspective.

Highlighting Bormuth's and Taylor's studies on the cloze procedure, Smith (Buros, 1978) concludes that using an every fifth word deletion, keeping the first and last sentences intact, and scoring exact word replacement for both ease and objectivity will result in an effective cloze test. In conclusion, Rand (1978) added that a total of 50 deletions achieved maximum reliability but that reliability levels off after 25 deletions. Since not much precision is gained between 25 and 50 deletions, a shorter test using exact word replacement can be considered acceptable, convenient, and objective.

Summary

Student writing has been studied along two perspectives, syntax and consideration of audience. The communication model, as derived through cognitive theory, stresses that because a child's language development is egocentric, he can best read and comprehend his own written language. Nystrom (1979) and Walmsley (1978) contend that clear communication occurs only when the writer is aware of and attuned to his audience.

Many studies have identified that ability to comprehend syntactic structures increases with development. Students best comprehend language as they habitually produce it (Smith, 1970). Older or better readers comprehend transformationally more complex material than their younger peers (Duffelmeyer, 1979).

It is important that readability estimates consider sentence length and word difficulty. Fry's (1977a) graph will be used because it has demonstrated good reliability and it is easy to use.

The close procedure is a reliable test of comprehension. To ensure reliability, test length must be considered. Exact word scoring is as reliable as synonymic scoring, especially where ease of scoring is considered.

CHAPTER III

PROCEDURES

Selected published materials were paired with student-authored materials of the same readability and the same topic. Using the cloze method to test for comprehension, student scores on the published sample were compared to scores from the student-authored sample thus proving or disproving the null hypothesis that there would be no difference in student comprehension of student-authored versus published passages.

Population

Students from the ninth and tenth grades in one of two full session high schools of a suburban school district participated in this study. According to a 1977 self-report, this district ranks tenth largest in the state, with a total public school population of approximately 14,500 students. Parochial school enrollment within the district was reported to be 4,153 students.

Geographically, this suburban township covers 39.38 square miles. At the time of the report, about one-half of the land within the district had been developed, but a trend for growth was noted.

According to the 1970 census, population for this geographic area reached approximately 80,000. Mean family income for 21,399 families was reported to be \$11,682.00 annually. About 24,000 persons had foreign or mixed parentage or were foreign born themselves. The ethnic

breakdown of school population in 1976 was 94% white, 5% black, .4% Hispanic, and .6% other.

For persons 25 years or older, the 1970 census indicated that 52% of the population were high school graduates, but that only 6,500 persons had attended college for one to four years. The drop-out rate for this township has decreased from 4.1% in 1973-74 to 3.2% in 1975-76 indicating a possible trend in educational background within the parameters of the district.

At the time of the 1977 report, ninth and tenth grade populations at this school were 616 and 618 students, respectively. As of October 1981, ninth grade enrollment had dropped to 457 students and tenth grade enrollment to 450. This reflects a declining enrollment trend which has been the object of some concern in the school district since the issue of their 1977 information guide. Passing scores on the 1982 New Jersey Minimum Basic Skills test were achieved by 89.9% of the ninth grade population.

Materials

Eight published passages ranging from 205 to 270 words were selected as the published passages to be used in this study. This length requirement was necessary because the cloze tests were designed to have 35 to 45 slots. Student motivation across time influenced these decisions. The range of readability levels of passages varied from 5 grade equivalent to 10 grade equivalent. Criteria for selection were length and readability as estimated by Fry's Graph (1977).

Sources for passages range from student text books to a local newspaper. Each of the eight passages has a different topic. All passages, however, are written in prose and all passages have informative of instructional qualities.

The content of passages was screened. Passages containing a large amount of technical data or lists of names and terms were not used because students were required to write similar passages which included this same content. Too much content would make composition, within a framework of 200 to 275 words, rather difficult.

Figure 1 lists the titles of the eight target samples. Other information included in this table are the samples' source, the exact number of words, and the estimated readability.

Title	Source	Length	Estimated Readability
Are You Superstitious?	<u>Exploring the Unknown</u>	205 words	grade 5
(no title) page 23	<u>Scoring High in Reading - Book D</u>	222 words	grade 6
(no title) page 56	<u>Be a Better Reader Level C</u>	240 words	grade 6
Good Boy, Knute	<u>Paces</u>	237 words	grade 6
(no title) unit 13	<u>Practicing Reading Level C</u>	232 words	grade 7
World Wheelers	<u>Scholastic Scope</u>	270 words	grade 7
(no title) unit 3	<u>Cloze Connections Level F</u>	230 words	grade 9
Blaze Erupts in Warehouse	<u>The Trentonian vol. 37</u>	243 words	grade 10

FIGURE 1 - A listing of the published passages used in this study showing number of words per passage and estimated readability.

Method

Generation of student written samples occurred during a two-day lesson within 17 different tenth grade English classrooms. Classroom teachers read standard general instructions to the class. The instructions outline the purpose for this data collection which, as explained to the student writers, was to determine and assess the kind of language and the specific vocabulary that today's high school students use when they write (see Appendix A).

These instructions also limit sample length from 200 to 275 words. They suggest students complete a rough copy on Day One and a polished copy by the end of the period on Day Two.

Each student received individual topic and content instructions for his particular assignment. The instruction sheets included a passage title as well as content information. This content information consisted of a list of facts which students used in the construction of their passages (see Appendix B for sample). Students were instructed to combine and categorize the listed facts into an order which seemed appropriate to them and to include all of the facts in their passage. This is how parallel content between student-authored and published passages was achieved. Various forms of each instruction sheet randomly ordered content information to control for possible ordering effect. Randomized order was obtained using a fish-bowl procedure.

Instructions limit students to number of words, but do not suggest number of sentences or number of paragraphs. Directions also stress that listed information was to be interpreted and worded to

the student's preference, and not used verbatim from the list. Any pertinent vocabulary terms were defined.

The distribution of these instructions throughout grade ten was random. Randomization was achieved through random distribution of instructions within classrooms. A total of eight different sets of instructions were used. These correspond to the eight published passages selected for this study.

Teachers were instructed to assist student-writers in strictly mechanical areas such as spelling, punctuation, or verb agreement. The writer was solely responsible for the syntactic and semantic aspects of the composition such as sentence structure and passage organization.

Test Instrument

All student written samples were collected and organized according to topic. With the goal of choosing one individual sample, the following elimination procedures were undertaken. First, any sample which did not meet a total word requirement of 200 to 275 words was set aside. Of the remaining samples, only those which did meet content requirements by including all the information provided on the instruction sheets were retained in the sample. Using the Fry (1977b) graph, any of the sample which did not fall within one year of the published sample with respect to readability was eliminated from the target group.

Those samples remaining had been screened and considered relatively equal to the published material with respect to length, content, and readability. Each was eligible to be selected as the student

written sample used in the study. The student-written sample, paired with each published sample, was selected randomly using the fish-bowl procedure.

Constructing the Cloze

Following standard practice, every fifth word, starting with the second sentence in each sample was deleted, thereby constructing sixteen cloze tests. Eight of the tests were student written; eight from the pre-selected published materials. An equal sized blank for each slot indicated, to the student, where a word was missing. For a sample of 200 to 275 words, and excluding the first and last sentences, each cloze test contained 33 to 47 slots. Matched pairs of samples, student-authored versus published, were controlled so that the total number of slots in one totalled within 5 the number of slots in the other. No adjustments, as far as slot position, were made so that students were required to fill in function as well as content words (see Appendix C for sample).

Randomization of Packets

For each day of the two day activity, each student completed one cloze test. Each student's test packet was collated so that no student completed both tests of one matched pair. No student completed a cloze test for the student-authored and published passage of the same content.

Collation of the packets was as follows. Sample One was paired with each of the fourteen other samples. Omitted was Sample Two because Sample Two had the same content. This pairing was continued through Sample Sixteen as illustrated in Figure 2.

Passage Number	Passage Number															
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1			+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
2			+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
3	+	+			+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
4	+	+			+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
5	+	+	+	+			+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
6	+	+	+	+			+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
7	+	+	+	+	+	+			+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
8	+	+	+	+	+	+			+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
9	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+			+	+	+	+	+	+
10	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+			+	+	+	+	+	+
11	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+			+	+	+	+
12	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+			+	+	+	+
13	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+			+	+
14	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+			+	+
15	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+		
16	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	

+ indicates pairing of passages

FIGURE 2. A chart illustrating randomization of packets. A + indicates pairing of passages. Blanks indicate that these passages were not paired.

Randomized distribution of tests was essential since ninth grade students are grouped homogenously into different classes according to ability (as demonstrated by class grades as well as yearly standardized test scores).

Teacher Instruction

Since individual classroom teachers monitored the cloze assessment within their classrooms, teacher training sessions stressed the importance of standardization. Each individual teacher would read test instructions from a standard form. The procedure was designed

for independent student completion. Teachers were instructed to encourage students to do their best and to make an educated guess on difficult slots. Teachers did not directly assist students in the completion of the task.

Students were instructed at the beginning of the testing session on each of the two testing days. A sample cloze training exercise preceded the testing on each day. During training, the whole class participated in completion of the cloze.

The testing session took place on two consecutive Wednesday afternoons for the entire ninth grade population.

Scoring

Because of the large number of samples generated and because reported reliability does not vary significantly enough to outweigh an ease of scoring factor (McKenna, 1976), exact replacement of the cloze samples was used as scoring criteria. Partial credit scoring, by accepting synonymic replacement, more accurately assesses student comprehension. However, since the purpose of this sampling was to compare student performance across pairs of samples, amount of inferred comprehension was of less interest than the comparison of one score to another. The importance is to judge each sample of the pair along the same criteria, not to account for the highest possible score.

Analysis

To determine the significance of student comprehension scores, a t-test was used. The mean percentage score of student-written

passages was compared to the mean percentage score of the published passages. Significance at a .05 level was deemed acceptable.

Summary

To test the hypothesis that student written passages are comprehended better by peers than published passages, a comparison study was employed. Ninth grade students completed cloze tests of 200 to 275 words. These tests were constructed from pre-existing published and student-authored passages. The student-authored samples were generated from a tenth grade population. Pairs of passages were equated for length, content, and readability. Mean cloze scores were analyzed, using a t-test, to determine significance of score differences between student-authored and published material.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Students took cloze tests to determine comprehension of 200 to 275 word passages. Eight pairs of passages were used in the study. One of each pair was a student written sample, the other was a published sample. Pairs were controlled for length, content, and readability. Finally, each student-authored sample is compared individually to its published pair.

Results

There was little difference between mean cloze scores for the student-authored versus published passages. The mean cloze score for the student written passages, 50.44%, was slightly higher than the mean cloze score for published passages, which was 48.06%. The difference between these scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level as per a t-test calculation.

This overall mean score for student written as well as published passages was calculated using the mean cloze/percent correct score for each passage. Passage mean scores were calculated for each of the sixteen passages. For example, all raw scores from Sample One, the published version of "Are You Superstitious?", were averaged. This mean raw score, 23.12, has been reported in terms of percent correct, 55.05%. Mean percent scores are reported in Table 1.

TABLE 1

MEAN CLOZE SCORES IN PERCENT AND READABILITY
IN GRADE EQUIVALENT FOR EIGHT
PAIRED PASSAGES

Passage Title	Student-Authored		Published	
	Read- ability	Mean Cloze % Correct	Read- ability	Mean Cloze % Correct
Are You Superstitious?	6	55.05	5	53.3
Castles	7	45.58	6	57.9
Who Puts the Blue in Jeans	7	55.79	6	38.66
Good Boy, Knute	6	51.42	6	50.89
Dog Decision	7	58.27	7	49.88
Blaze Erupts in Warehouse	9	47.68	10	48.17
Pirates	9	44.8	9	40.68
World Wheelers	6	44.9	7	45.02
mean	7.13	50.44	7	48.06
S.D.	1.25	5.424	1.85	6.737

t value for cloze % correct = .78, not significant at .05
t value for readability = .165, not significant at .05

It is interesting to note, however, that the mean readability of student-authored passages was slightly higher, at 7.13 grade equivalent, than the 7.0 grade readability of the published passages. Therefore, even though student-authored passages were of higher readability, cloze scores were generally higher.

Readability Comparison

As noted in Chapter III, no difference of more than one year existed between the readability level of student written passages and published passages. A published passage, rated at grade 5 equivalent was of the lowest measured readability. The most difficult passage, rated at 10 grade readability, was also one of the published samples. In three cases, the student written sample was of higher readability than its paired published sample. Two published samples were rated more difficult than their student-authored pairs, however, mean cloze scores were higher. In three cases, readabilities were the same; for these samples, mean cloze scores on the student samples written were higher. The published samples had greater range of readabilities, from grade 5 to grade 10, but the mean readability of the student written samples was higher.

For both student-authored and published passages, scores tended to be lower as passage readability increased. For passages of 5 and 6 grade readability, cloze scores on five out of seven total passages were greater than 50%. Cloze scores on seven of the nine with readabilities of 7, 9, and 10 grade readability were generally less than 50%. This trend is consistent with generally accepted findings, that as passage difficulty increases comprehension becomes more

difficult. Therefore, fewer students would be expected to achieve high scores on the more difficult passages.

Passage Pair Comparisons

A different number of students took each sample. The number of students completing each sample ranged from 34 to 47, with a mean of 40.38 for the student-authored samples and 42.88 for the published samples.

Direct comparison of raw scores was impossible since the total number of slots per test varied. For each pair, the range was controlled to vary within five slots. In three cases the student-authored passages had a greater number of slots, in four cases the published samples had more, and in one case each sample contained an equal number of slots. The range for student-authored samples was from 33 to 44 slots per sample with a mean of 38.38 slots. The mean for the published samples was 39, with a range of from 35 to 47 slots (see TABLE 2 for illustration). Since Rand (1978) has reported that precision in test reliability levels off after 25 items, each of the sixteen tests has been presumed reliable as far as this factor is concerned.

When comparing means from the study, no significant difference was found. However, a comparison of paired passage means has been pursued. As indicated in TABLE 3, a difference between the scores of student-authored versus published passages, of the same content, was found to be significant in four cases. Scores on the student-authored samples are significantly higher in three of these cases. Published scores are significantly higher for one set of passages.

TABLE 2

MEAN RAW CLOZE SCORES AND NUMBER OF STUDENTS
FOR EIGHT PAIRS OF PASSAGES

Passage Title	Student-Authored			Published		
	Mean Correct N	Total N	Students N	Mean Correct N	Total N	Students N
Are You Superstitious?	23.12	42	41	19.72	37	46
Castles	17.32	38	44	23.74	41	47
Who Puts the Blue in Jeans	18.41	33	37	14.69	38	45
Good Boy, Knute	18.51	36	45	18.32	36	38
Dog Decision	23.89	41	37	20.95	38	42
Blaze Erupts in Warehouse	18.12	38	40	16.86	35	43
Pirates	15.68	35	45	16.27	40	44
World Wheelers	19.79	44	34	21.16	47	38
mean	19.36	38.38	40.38	18.96	39	42.88
S. D.	2.82	3.74	4.14	2.988	3.78	3.398

TABLE 3

t-VALUES OF STUDENT-AUTHORED
VERSUS PUBLISHED PASSAGES

Passage Title	Student-Authored Mean % Correct	Published Mean % Correct	Computed t-value
Are You Superstitious?	55.05	53.3	3.98*
Castles	45.58	57.9	5.84*
Who Puts the Blue in Jeans	55.79	38.66	4.59*
Good Boy, Knute	51.42	50.89	.198
Dog Decision	58.27	49.88	2.39*
Blaze Erupts in Warehouse	47.68	48.17	.99
Pirates	44.8	40.68	.78
World Wheelers	44.9	45.02	.96

*significant at .05

Of the eight pairs, scores of student-authored passages were higher in five cases. There seems to be no trend to indicate why one passage was more or less difficult than its pair. Higher or lower readability levels do not follow a pattern consistent with scores. It is therefore doubtful that number of syllables or sentence length are significant factors.

Discussion

It has been reported that students more easily comprehend familiar syntactic patterns (Takahashi, 1975; Tatham, 1968). Analysis of passages from this study might suggest that the syntax of student-authored passages is more similar to and therefore more easily comprehended by peers than the syntax of the published passages.

This is consistent with developmental theory as it pertains to education. Developmental theory describes behavior in terms of increasing abilities. In the cognitive domain, development means increasing language, interpretation of language, and formulation of ideas using language.

A developmental gap between the cognitive abilities of adults and students may prove to be quite evident in the area of writing. Use of different transformations in writing varies with age and development. In addition, "as a student matures he comprehends best the material which is written near his own productive syntactic level" (Smith, 1978, p. 276).

Therefore, differences in cloze scores may be the result of the writer's cognitive maturity in relation to his reader.

This study differs from those mentioned in the Literature Review chapter because student-authored writing was used as a test and not analyzed for syntactical or semantic components. Direct comparisons to previous research cannot be made. It can be presumed that passages, whether student-authored or published, which evidenced higher scores were more comprehensible. These passages were probably better constrained, as described by Nystrand (1979). These passages seemingly communicated more effectively in terms of graphics, syntax, semantics, and context.

Summary

A t-test comparison evidenced no significant differences, overall, between the comprehension of student-authored and published passages. However, passage pair comparisons show that some differences do exist. It is suggested that these differences are linked to cognitive development and could be demonstrated through an analysis of syntactic transformation patterns.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Student comprehension was tested using cloze procedure. Tests were constructed from both student written and published passages. No significant difference in scores was found between student-authored and published passages.

Summary

Research in the area of student writing has identified that writing complexity seems to increase with age. This is consistent with theories of cognitive development.

Writers use increasingly complex types of transformations as they mature. Studies have identified the types of transformations which are commonly used by writers at different age and grade levels (Takahashi, 1975). Passages written at a transformationally typical grade 5 level, are best comprehended by students at that level, fifth graders (Smith, 1970).

These studies have been interpreted as supporting the concept of peer writing. Students can best comprehend passages which are transformationally similar to their own speech and writing patterns. Therefore, students have a better chance of effectively communicating to their peers than do published authors.

Nystrand (1979) and Walmsley (1978) both contend that a writer's sense of audience is a crucial component of effective communication. To communicate well, a writer must adequately constrain the reader (Nystrand, 1979). By this Nystrand means that the writer must control the predictions readers are likely to make. He refers to Goodman's psycholinguistic guessing game theory (cited in Nystrand, 1979).

Walmsley suggests that writing for an audience involves the author's ability to clearly communicate across four contexts. These contexts he identifies as linguistic, social, schematic, and strategic (Walmsley, 1978).

Conclusions that can be drawn from these studies suggest that students, who are developmentally similar, come from similar social and environmental backgrounds, and have similar experiences with the world in general, can more effectively communicate with their peers than can published authors.

Therefore, this study asked the question, "is student-authored material more easily comprehended than published material?"

Eight published passages of 200-270 words were selected. Fry's (1977b) graph was used to estimate the readability of each published passage. The content of each passage was listed and used in a two-day class writing exercise for the tenth grade students at a public high school.

Students were directed to write a 200-275 word composition using all of the listed information. The information, as presented, was not in order. Students were instructed to group and order the information and to use their own vocabulary in the composition.

All student written samples were then screened and eliminated for number of words, content, and readability level. Of the samples remaining, one was randomly selected to be paired with the published sample of the same content.

Cloze tests were constructed using the eight published and eight student-authored samples.

Ninth grade students, during English class, took the cloze tests. Each student completed two tests, one on each day of a two-day exercise. Mean percent scores for each pair of passages were compared. Scores were significantly higher for the student-authored passages in three cases. Overall means, however, evidenced no significant difference.

Conclusions

It has been stated in the hypothesis that there would be no difference in comprehension scores on a cloze test between student-authored passages and published passages of the same general content and readability.

The results evidence a slight indication that student-authored passages are more easily comprehended than are published passages. However, due to the fact that a t-test calculation evidenced no significant difference between the overall mean percent score of student-authored passages compared to the overall mean percent score of published passages, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected.

Further Research

Due to the indications that peer written passages might be easier for students to comprehend, further research (as suggested below) might provide more conclusive results.

The same kind of study conducted at the elementary level should evidence greater differences in student-authored versus published writing due to the more simplistic writing of elementary students.

A study analyzing the components of the passages which were comprehended most easily would yield more information in the areas of readability and comprehension. Those components to be analyzed would include commonly used transformations and syntactical patterns.

Research has shown that differences in scores between synonymic and exact word scoring of cloze tests is not significant when weighed against ease of scoring and time. On the other hand, since overall comprehension of passages is important in assessing student comprehension of peer writing, use of a synonymic scoring format might be considered. Synonymic scoring gives credit for the slotting of terms which indicate comprehension of contextual meaning. If a slot is completed with a synonym or near synonym of the exact word, credit is given. This method of scoring may indicate that even though exact word choice may differ, student-authored passages are more easily comprehended than published passages.

Eliciting writing without influencing the content or intent of the student's composition is a difficult task. Using an approach other than listing content information bears serious

consideration. Creating a situation in which a student is forced to use his own resources might elicit more genuine and personal student-authored compositions. Vocabulary, language patterns, and syntax may prove to be uniquely the student-author's rather than parroted from the provided written content information. This contrived situation would motivate the student to draw upon his previous learning and experience and to relate this to the new context in which he has been placed. Evoking the student's writing in this manner would require him to draw upon his own schema. Some suggested situations to which the student can react in writing are films, demonstrations, experiments, and class trips.

Finally, the results of any study which promotes classroom use of student writing legitimizes teaching methods such as the Language Experience Approach because this kind of method incorporates reading, writing, speaking, and listening as interrelated processes. The interrelationship of reading, writing, speaking, and listening is the basis for the communication model of learning as described by cognitive theory.

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APPENDIX A

INSTRUCTIONS FOR STUDENT WRITERS

Instructions to be Read to Students

Short student written compositions are being collected to study the kind of language and specific words that today's high school students use when they write.

You will be given assignment guide sheets. On these sheets are directions and all the information you need to write a short composition on a specific topic. Your composition title and topic will be named on your guide sheet.

All compositions must fall in the range of 200 to 275 words.

The information which is to be included in your composition is not in order. You must organize and categorize the information before you write. Remember, all information must be included, but the grouping and ordering of that information must be determined by you, the writer.

You will have two days to complete this assignment. It is suggested that you organize your composition using the information provided on the assignment guide sheet and compose a rough draft of your composition during class on the first day. Use the second class period to rewrite or correct errors. Double check your compositions to make sure all listed content information is included. Submit a final copy to your teacher by the end of the period.

APPENDIX A (continued)

Do not put your name on these papers. Please write the number code appearing at the top of your assignment on the top right corner of your composition before you hand it in.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE OF STUDENT CONTENT INFORMATION SHEET

Topic: origin of the names for jeans

Title: Who Puts the Blue in Jeans

Vocabulary: --

Information:

1. Strauss realized prospectors needed strong and comfortable pants that wouldn't wear out too quickly
2. in 1850, a New York merchant named Levi Strauss followed the gold rush to California
3. experimental pants were a huge success
4. sailors from Genoa, Italy were called Genes
5. Strauss used denim tent material to make a pair of pants for a customer
6. a certain type of cloth made in Nimes, France was called serge de Nimes--this name was shortened to denim
7. sailors from Dhunga wore denim pants
8. Strauss experimented
9. now people all over the world ask for Levi's when they want blue jeans
10. sailors from Dhunga, India were called Dungarees
11. digging through rocks and panning for gold is tough work
12. sailors called Genes wore wide-legged denim pants

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE OF CLOZE TEST

Are You Superstitious?

Long ago, people didn't understand much about the world. They didn't know why _____ sun came up every _____. Or why trees and _____ grew. Or why people _____. So they made up _____ about things they couldn't _____.

These stories sounded true. _____ they made people less _____ of the world. So _____ believed them.

Beliefs like _____ are superstitions. People who _____ them are superstitious. Here _____ three superstitions that some _____ believe today. How did _____ begin?

The number 13 _____ not been trusted for _____ of years. Many people _____ it goes back to _____ Last Supper. There were _____ at that meal. _____ of them turned Christ _____ to His enemies. So _____ began to believe that _____ is an unlucky number.

_____ was killed on a _____. Also, years ago, people _____ that witches met on _____. So Friday the 13th _____ thought to be a _____ unlucky day.

APPENDIX C (continued)

In the _____ century, a scientist found _____
certain chemical in fish. _____ else found the same
_____ in human brains. People _____ believing
that if they _____ fish, they would have _____
of this chemical in _____ brains. So they believed that
eating fish would make them smarter.